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ABSTRACT

The "consultant" model for the writing center professional is especially appropriate when graduate students are the ones seeking assistance with their writing. For many academicians with backgrounds in the humanities and liberal arts, "consulting" is a term fraught with mystery. Many have never "consulted" and are not entirely clear what a consultant does. Much has been written on the subject of consulting ethics. The American Association of Professional Writing Consultants (APWC) developed a code of ethics in the mid-1980s and June Gallessich has published one in her book "The Professional Practice of Consultation." She provides a detailed discussion of 28 principles of consulting ethics, some of which could apply to the development of ethical, adult relationships between writing center professionals and graduate students. The consultant model for the writing center professional may also be developed along Aristotelian lines. In the Aristotelian scheme, the writing center professional would be considered as a "useful" friend, which is one of three types of friends Aristotle defined. (TB)

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Writing Centers and Graduate Education

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The Writing Center Professional and Graduate Students: Developing An Ethical Paradigm

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Some time ago I wrote a paper where I discussed some of the challenges to writing centers posed by graduate students.[1] At that time I was concerned that many writing center professionals worked under the unexamined belief that the dynamics of tutoring graduate students were essentially the same as tutoring undergraduates— acknowledging perhaps that graduate students were a bit older and a bit brighter than undergraduates. Accordingly, I attempted to initiate a dialogue concerning the specialized issues graduate students bring to the writing center, focusing on the differences between graduate students and undergraduates in terms of their motivation for writing, their background in writing, and their attitude toward writing.

My conclusion in that paper was that writing center professionals establish adult, professional relationships with graduate students—rejecting both the traditional student/teacher model and the more current collaborative writing teaching model used in the writing center. And my answer on how to go about achieving that end was the formulation of a "consultant" model for the writing

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[1] "Some of the Challenges to Writing Centers Posed by Graduate Students, *Proceedings of the Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association*, 3 (1991) 41-46.

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center professional. This morning, I would like to pick up where I left off in my previous paper and discuss the development of an ethical paradigm for the relationship between writing center professionals using a consultant model and the graduate students who use the services of the writing center.

For many academicians with backgrounds in the humanities and liberal arts, "consulting" is a term fraught with mystery. Many of us have never consulted and are not entirely clear what a consultant does exactly. Some of us consider consulting to be associated with a morally suspect corporate system. And quite a few of us are uneasy with a term, to use Dwight Stevenson's definition, that refers to "communication-related, income-producing activities carried out in business, industry, and government."[2]

There appears to be some research to bear out the aloofness of the humanities from the practice of professional consulting. For instance, Marver and Patton have observed that although 20% of all American academics are in the liberal arts, this number only accounts for 11% of all consulting work done by academicians.[3] Yet there's an interesting twist to this statistic: while it is true that academics in the liberal arts consult less frequently than their colleagues in other disciplines, other researchers have suggested that the proportion of academic writing specialists who consult may be far higher than the low general liberal arts figure and that, "at least for some writing teachers, consulting is a familiar and frequent activity."[4] As a

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[2] Dwight Stevenson, "The Writing Teacher in the Workplace: Some Questions and Answers about Consulting," *Writing in Nonacademic Settings*, ed. Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami (New York: Guilford, 19850, p. 347.

[3] J.D. Marver and C. V. Patton, "The Correlates of Consultation: American Academics in the "Real World,'" *Journal of Higher Education*, 5 (1976), p. 325.

[4] Dwight Stevenson, "Evaluation Technical Communication Faculty: Some Empirically-Based Criteria and Guidelines," *Resources in Education* (September 1985).

matter of fact, in recognition of this high level of activity, the American Association of Professional Writing Consultants (APWC) was formed in 1981 as an outgrowth of interactions among consultants at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. So, I would argue that consulting is hardly a model for us to disdain.

I am not suggesting that everyone here promptly become a working consultant. I am suggesting, however, that the "consultant" is an appropriate, recognizable, and effective model for writing center professionals to use when establishing professional relationships with their adult graduate students. The real question I am raising this morning is just what shape a consultant model would take in the writing center—specifically, how would it operate ethically.

Much has been written on the subject of consulting ethics in general, by the way. Most professional consulting organizations publish codes that, while strictly voluntary, offer standards for their members to follow. The APWC, for instance, developed a Code of Ethics in the mid-1980s. A useful synthesis of professional codes can be found in June Gallessich's work, *The Profession and Practice of Consultation*. There she provides a detailed discussion of the twenty-eight principles of consulting ethics, some of which—in conjunction with the more specific APWC Code—could certainly apply in the development of ethical, adult relationships between writing center professionals and graduate students. Those principles particularly helpful to writing center professionals would include the following:

- Consultants are responsible for safeguarding the welfare of their client

organizations.

- Consultants present their professional qualifications and limitations accurately.
- Consultants do not make unrealistic promises about the benefits of their services.
- Consultants avoid manipulating consultees and instead seek to increase their independence and freedom of choice.
- Consultants establish clear contracts with well-defined parameters.
- Consultants seek to maintain the highest standard of competence in their profession, keeping abreast of new theoretical, empirical, and technical developments that are related to consultation.
- Consultants know their professional strengths, weaknesses, and biases; they avoid allowing their particular professional "sets" to distort their approaches to the needs of their clients.
- Consultants are aware of personal characteristics which predispose them to systematic biases—issues of age, ethic origin. sex, and social status that may distort their perceptions and recommendations.
- Consultants regularly assess their strengths and weaknesses.
- Consultants cooperate with other consultants and with members of other professions.[5]

The consultant model for the writing center professional may be also constructed along Aristotelian lines. 2,500 years ago Aristotle identified three distinctive varieties of friendship. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* he listed (1)

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[5] June Gallessich, *The Practice and Profession of Consultation: A Handbook for Consultants, Trainers of Consultants, and Consumers of Consultation Services*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).

friendship based on utility, (2) friendship based on pleasure, and (3) friendship based idealism. The writing center professional should be counted among life's "useful" friends.

"Useful" friends—consultants and mentors, if you will—help people get what they want. Indeed, most professional relationships are bound to be "useful" friendships in this sense. This is not to criticize them and any facile condemnation of "using people" does not apply here. Sometimes it is quite clear when someone is "using us" and, if the cost is negligible, we often do not mind; particularly, if it gives us the feeling of being "useful." Tutors who help doctoral students outline their dissertations, who help law students through the intricacies of writing briefs, medical students through the rudiments of case histories should not feel "used," except in the sense that their position is of use to others and such help is valued and highly regarded.

But most of the time, the writing center professional/graduate student relationship is mutually useful, as is all good consultant work is. As writing center professionals, we are paid for interesting and stimulating work. We are given rich opportunities to learn from the experience of others. And we are provided with a steady supply of examples to be used in our research, teaching, and publication. All of these are among the rewards of being a successful consultant.